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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND EB
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TREASURY FOR OASIA
STATE PASS TO USTR FOR WEISEL
STATE PASS TO FEDERAL RESERVE SAN FRANCISCO FOR DAN FINEMAN
STATE PASS FEDERAL RESERVE NEW YORK FOR MATT HILDEBRANDT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: ECON PGOV PHUM PREL TH

SUBJECT: THAI HEALTH MINISTER TO VISIT WASHINGTON

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

¶11. (SBU) Summary. The proposed visit of Health Minister Mongkol Na Songkhla to Washington provides the USG the opportunity to engage with perhaps the most high profile member of the current Thai cabinet in terms of driving his agenda forward. As judged by recent polls, he is clearly the most popular minister among Thai people - supported by NGOs and the press - for his "principled" stand in "taking on" on the multinational pharmaceutical companies in order to provide better health care to poor Thais. Meetings with senior USG officials could be used to try and alter the "us vs. them" attitude of Mongkol and his team and remind them of our long cooperation in the field of health. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) Health Minister Mongkol is planning to visit Washington at the suggestion of the North America department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The MFA hopes that the minister's outreach efforts will improve Thailand's image, which was battered by Mongkol's decision to issue compulsory licenses on several pharmaceutical products, including two made by U.S. companies.

¶13. (SBU) During a recent visit to Thailand, U.S. Chamber of Commerce officials led by Senior Vice President for International Affairs, Dan Christman, encouraged the concept of a visit by Mongkol as a means to expose the minister to other points of view. Mongkol has spent his entire career as a provincial health official and bureaucrat at the Health Ministry. His only significant time abroad was the year he spent in Netherlands (1982) getting a master's degree in public health. In the cloistered atmosphere of the Ministry, Mongkol is influenced by NGOs and health advocates who support his actions, and access to alternative views is limited. Mongkol's experience is one of a constant battle for budget in which failure has resulted in lack of treatment for Thais. However, Dr. Suwit Wibulpolprasert, one of the Ministry's leading supporters of compulsory licensing, told us the Minister knows that it is important to listen to alternative views.

¶14. (SBU) One of Embassy's leading points on the compulsory license issue has been the necessity for consultations with stakeholders and interested parties before taking drastic actions as Thailand has done. Mongkol appears to be interested in now doing exactly that: consulting and discussing with U.S. policymakers on future policy decisions. A U.S. visit would give Mongkol an opportunity to hear views from fellow health officials whose opinions he would respect, rather than solely from foreign business, whose opinions he has already discounted to a large degree.

15. (SBU) Prime Minister Surayud has promised the Ambassador that no new compulsory licenses will be issued. While we have confidence in Surayud, his tenure will be short-lived. Given Mongkol's popularity, we need to bring him around to another approach to better assure that a new government doesn't pursue Mongol's previous approach to CLs.

16. (SBU) The debate on compulsory licenses in Thailand has become polarized, focusing on a distinction between the health of patients and the profits of corporations. The larger dilemma of providing first rate health care in developing nations and the myriad issues surrounding it has been lost. Embassy would like to use this visit to begin a larger discussion of health economics in Thailand and globally, and ways that health care infrastructure can be improved to make drastic measures such as compulsory licenses unnecessary.

Boyce